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About To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932

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In 1932, Salvadoran forces under the direction of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez killed some 10,000 indigenous and ladino peasants and workers. *La Matanza*, as it came to be known, was identified as turning point for El Salvador's indigenous peoples who were targeted by the forces of repression despite what some described as their passive role in a communist-inspired uprising. In *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932*, Jeffrey L. Gould and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago provide a fine-grained, thoroughly researched history of *La Matanza*. The book, which examines land tenure patterns and labor organizing strategies in the years before the repression, demonstrates that indigenous people actively participated as communist organizers and instigators of insurrection. The work is based on 200 interviews, archival materials from El Salvador, the United States, London, and Moscow, and the researchers' thirty-year experience in the region. The authors disseminated results of their investigation in El Salvador by rapidly translating the book into Spanish and producing a documentary film shown to people in the affected region. The importance of their work is defined explicitly as a contribution to United States scholarship on Central America, and implicitly as an aid to recovering local memory, and as a resource for left-leaning political groups working to develop effective organizing strategies in El Salvador.

The significance of the book also reflects the interstitial place of *La Matanza* in the contemporary history and historiography of Central America. The massacre appeared to

foreshadow the brutal United States sponsored military repression in Central America during the revolutionary era from the 1960s through the 1990s. Right-wing Salvadoran opposition to the revolutionary movement sometimes was vocalized as an appeal for “another General Hernández Martínez” – a short hand for violent, indiscriminate repression. *La Matanza* seemed a precursor to the genocide in neighboring Guatemala during that country’s 36-year civil war. Like the genocide in Guatemala, in El Salvador, Hernández Martínez’s forces targeted indigenous people in what the authors, citing the Guatemalan *Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico*, describe as an “‘intention’ to liquidate blacks and Indians to accomplish their counterinsurgent goals” (xviii). Moreover, as was true of the conflict in Guatemala, communist forces were blamed for “using” indigenous people, making them appear defenseless and therefore innocent victims of military repression. The epigraph associated with El Salvador’s 1932 *La Matanza*, declared that “they killed the just for the sinners” (209) while that for Guatemala in the 1980s claimed that indigenous people were caught “between two fires” (Stoll 20).¹

La Matanza’s place in the history and historiography of Central America influences the methodology and content of *To Rise in Darkness*. Gould and Lauria-Santiago’s use of oral testimony and their emphasis on memory resonate with the truth commission reports that institutionalized the conclusions of the armed conflicts in the region. Their principal collaborator, Reynaldo Patriz, had what the authors describe as “his own agenda, notably a strong belief that the survivors of 1932 and 1980 needed to talk publicly for both therapeutic and political reasons about the massacres that had taken place in his village and region” (xi). Like many of the interviewees for Guatemala’s *Nunca Más: Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, Informe Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* and the *Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico* reports, Patriz was a Catholic lay leader whose religious training (unremarked upon by the authors) surely reflected the ethos of the era of contemporary military repression and the truth commissions. One of Gould and Lauria-Santiago’s principal

¹ Stoll, David. *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

sources, the testimony of Miguel Mármol, was written by Salvadoran revolutionary leader Roque Dalton and based on conversations between the two men in Cuba in the 1960s.

To Rise in Darkness provides an impressive analysis of the changes in land tenure and labor structures from the 1920s through the depression, arguing that increased coffee prices contributed to elite expansion of land holdings and the creation of two classes of rural workers: *colonos* and semi-proletarian peasants. At the same time, it facilitated the emergence of an urban artisan and labor class. As elites' wealth increased, they failed to develop a hegemonic project that would establish them as a cohesive class with a claim to promoting a Salvadoran identity embraced by urban and rural middle and working classes. The depression simultaneously worsened labor conditions for all rural and urban workers and increased elites' ability to expand their land holdings fomenting wide-spread dissatisfaction among rural and urban workers. Around the same time, a political conjuncture created by the Romero Bosque government facilitated organizing by opening the political process. In this context, urban labor unions began to expand their reach into rural communities. Among the most impressive historical reconstructions of the book, is the authors' detailed account of how labor organizing moved from the urban center to the rural periphery and particularly their emphasis on the "spontaneous growth" (80) of the movement among indigenous and ladino rural workers "mobilized spontaneously" (137) which dramatically surpassed the expectations and, in some cases, even the desires of the urban organizers.

Participation in labor related organizing increased when Mexican labor organizer Jorge Fernández Anaya suggested to Federación Regional de Trabajadores de El Salvador (FRTS) militants that they organize a branch of Socorro Rojo Internacional (SRI), to defend political prisoners. The SRI operated in tandem with the FRTS with branches of each organization sometimes operating in the same communities. As the political opening that had been created by Bosque began to close under President Arturo Araujo, the SRI was poised to respond to government repression, allowing it to become a more important political force than the FRTS. During the period from June 1930, when the government made its first repressive moves against leftist organizers to May 17, 1931 when it killed the first SRI activists, the organizations had an

established network of organizers. General Hernández Martínez, who overthrew the Araujo government in a coup on December 2, 1931, appeared initially to support the workers, but subsequently turned on them. The authors demonstrate that indigenous people, far from being innocent victims of repression, were leaders of the FRTS and SRI movements.

Labor mobilization led to the two most important and most overlooked precursors to *La Matanza*. Workers organized strikes in early- to mid-December 1931, timed to coincide with the coffee harvest, demanding improved wages and working conditions. Toward the end of December, the armed forces began to repress municipal elections where communists seemed poised to win. In some cases this repression took the form of direct attacks on Partido Comunista Salvadoreño (PCS) organizers. Government repression provoked more organizing and resistance among rural indigenous and ladino FRTS/SRI supporters, which ultimately led to widespread insurrection. In the days after the fraudulent municipal elections, hundreds joined the strikes that had been temporarily suspended. Repression followed. Gould and Lauria-Santiago argue that at this point, demands of the rank-and-file for insurrection surpassed the expectations of the national communist party leadership. The rank-and-file ultimately forced the leadership to support the insurrection, rather than the reverse as has often been assumed. The book consistently refers to this insurrection as revolutionary, but the evidence suggests something more akin to a large-scale rebellion demanding reform: labor rights, fair elections, and land redistribution.

The detailed accounts of the development of this insurrection, the government's response culminating in the massacre of 10,000 people, and the subsequent distortion of "memory" are among the most compelling parts of *To Rise in Darkness*. The book's examination concludes by focusing on the long-term impact of *La Matanza* especially in relation to organizing during the revolutionary era of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), analyzing the repression during that era, and evaluating support for the FMLN after the war. This work is, in short, an extremely important contribution to the historiography of contemporary Central America. One wishes at times to hear more from the 200 interviews, the excerpts of which are fascinating, and more from Patriz whose insights the authors identify as crucial to their analysis.

The Catholic Church appears, albeit implicitly, throughout the book, from its importance as a contributor to indigenous identity, to testimony by Pauline missionary Antonio Conte to Segundo Montes's interviews, to the role of Reynaldo Patríz as a lay Catholic leader, making one wish for a more explicit discussion of its role. Likewise, the text makes clear that women played a critical role in the insurrection, and more analysis of it or of the absence of sources for this analysis, might have been beneficial. Finally, at times it is difficult to follow the narrative because of the extensive detail provided and a tendency to skip through time periods. Chapter 3, for example, concludes with violent military repression of peasant organizers on May 17, 1931, while all of chapter 4 focuses on indigenous peoples so the narrative does not turn to the aftermath of the May 17 repression until chapter 5. Nonetheless, the occasional challenge of following the narrative is richly rewarded by the extraordinary content of the work, which fills a critical gap in the literature on rebellion and revolution in Central America.

Gould, Jeffrey L., and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago. *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008. 368pp.